



Mexican American Urban Youth Perspectives on Neighborhood Stressors, Psychosocial Difficulties, and Coping: En Sus Propias Palabras

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Abstract

Objectives Many Mexican American families are immigrants who reside in under-resourced, urban communities, where they are at risk for numerous stressors, ranging from poverty to community violence. This paper analyzed qualitative data from Mexican American urban youth to explore their perspectives on neighborhood stressors, psychosocial difficulties and coping.

Methods A community-based participatory research approach was used with Mexican American youth from a Chicago neighborhood to explore personally salient experiences of living in their community. In collaboration with a community organization serving this neighborhood, 32 youth ranging from ages 12–18 with differing risk levels for violence and resilience participated in focus group sessions. Participants were asked about and discussed a wide range of topics covering (a) neighborhood characteristics and experiences; (b) psychosocial functioning and youth empowerment; (c) connection to school and community; and (d) family and cultural experiences.

Results Based on content analyses, three themes emerged related to stress (i.e., violence, gangs and the police, poverty) and coping strategies (i.e., avoidant, aggressive, and active coping). While pervasive stress appeared consistent across all groups, coping styles and psychological sequelae varied across the youth.

Conclusions The study demonstrates the importance of incorporating culturally relevant strategies, such as reframing, support seeking, and engaging familism, when developing interventions for use in this population. Furthermore, maximizing social supports by providing access to appropriate mentors and supportive peers should be a focus of educational programming and intervention with these youth. Finally, the authors offer a discussion of how these results might inform future community-based research.

Keywords Community violence · Poverty · Coping · Resilience · Mexican American youth · Adolescents · Community-based participatory research

With 55% of all first- and second-generation U.S. immigrant youth in 2012 identifying as Latino (Enchautegui 2014),

studying their adjustment in childhood and adolescence is an increasingly important subject. Latinx immigrant youth and families face a multitude of stressors: high levels of stress arise from poverty, police discrimination, and exposure to violence (Cervantes et al. 2013). Mexican American youth in particular, who represent the largest immigrant group in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2011), are faced with these numerous systemic stressors that can compromise their psychosocial development and functioning. As a result of such experiences, Mexican American youth, particularly in urban environments, report increased rates of anxiety and depression symptoms as well as delinquency problems as compared to White youth (Flores et al. 2010; Kann et al. 2016).

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Despite these high levels of stress, many Mexican American youth excel within challenging contexts, demonstrating resilience when confronted with stress. Resilience is conceptualized as a process or collection of protective factors that promote positive adaptation in response to significant stress (Brownlee et al. 2013). A *cultural ecological-transactional* perspective suggests that risk and resilience are influenced through interactions across various systems (individual, family, school, neighborhood, public policy), and that the dynamic interplay across systems is best understood through a cultural “lens” (Gonzales et al. 2012). For example, cultural values, such as familism, or the values related to a commitment to family and family support (Sabogal et al. 1987), may support other resilience across ecological contexts (e.g., Santiago and Wadsworth 2011; Santiago et al. 2016). Indeed, research suggests that familism is related to more use of adaptive coping among Mexican American youth (Coll et al. 1996; Santiago et al. 2016) and may enhance adaptive family processes (Santiago and Wadsworth 2011). In addition, Mexican American youth reported increased levels of self-efficacy in contexts of positive parenting (Ingoldsby et al. 2004) and high family cohesion (Leidy et al. 2010). Given their influence on adjustment, exploring culturally relevant coping strategies that help Mexican American youth adapt and navigate stressful contexts in order to promote their psychosocial development are a burgeoning area of importance in research in the U.S.

Consistent with the cultural ecological-transactional perspective, is recognition that racial stratification and discrimination in the U.S. can undermine positive youth adjustment. One such way of measuring youth adjustment involves investigation of internalizing symptoms, which are typically characterized as involving sadness and anxiety, and externalizing symptoms, which typically involve rule-breaking behavior and aggression (Krueger and Eaton 2015). Recent studies with Mexican American youth have explored the link of perceived ethnic or racial discrimination with internalizing symptoms and externalizing symptoms (Brittian et al. 2013; Toomey et al. 2013). Members of minority groups may have less control over stressful life events, which may lead to overwhelming negative feelings, increased distress, and maladaptive outcomes, including reduced use of adaptive coping (e.g., social support, planning; Aldridge and Roesch 2008). Specifically among Mexican American youth, heightened emotional distress also indicated more aggressive or avoidant-type coping with higher participation in violence and alcohol use over a one year period (Tschann et al. 2005).

When compared with other Latinx groups residing in the U.S. Mexican Americans represent a group with disproportionately diminished educational and economic resources (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Studies conducted

with adolescents within low-income communities revealed that youth are at higher risk for stressors like high crime rates and victimization, family dysfunction, poorly funded and dysfunctional school systems, and increased delinquent peer relations (Aldridge and Roesch 2008; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2004). In one study of Mexican American parents and 5th grade children, it was revealed that economic hardship was linked to parental depressive symptoms, which were in turn linked to marital problems and hostile parenting (Parke et al. 2004). Marital problems were also linked to higher behavioral and emotional difficulties among Mexican American youth as compared with European American youth.

Along with the fewer localized supports available to help youth navigate challenging circumstances, minority youth living in low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to community violence (Harrell 2005). Being victimized directly or indirectly by community violence has consistently been related to negative psychosocial outcomes in adolescents (Fowler et al. 2009). A neighborhood analysis of youth safety on the West Side of Chicago among Mexican American youth revealed that the majority of neighborhood school principals agreed that gang violence and bullying are the most frequent forms of violence experienced by the youth (Bocanegra and Rak 2015). Youth who frequently witness violence or experience high levels victimization appear to have greater difficulty coping and are at increased risk for feelings of hopelessness, depressive symptoms and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Fowler et al. 2009). As the Mexican American populations in high violence neighborhoods rise, there is increased tension between Mexican American youth, police officers, and the criminal justice system (Card and Raphael 2013).

Given the higher risk for deleterious psychological outcomes among Mexican American youth experiencing high levels of stress (Grant et al. 2003), recognizing how children and adolescents adjust to and cope with these stressors may reduce the incidence of these negative outcomes. Active, assertive, and support-seeking forms of coping, referred to as engagement coping styles, are typically considered adaptive styles of responses to psychosocial stressors, as they are often related to fewer symptoms of psychopathology, such as depression and anxiety (Wadsworth et al. 2011). In contrast, avoidant or denial strategies, referred to as disengagement coping, are sometimes linked with worse outcomes, including increased internalizing symptoms (Santiago and Wadsworth 2009). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that minority children and adolescents dealing with uncontrollable psychosocial stressors (e.g. poverty-related stressors, community violence) may utilize disengagement techniques protectively (Edlynn et al. 2008).

By using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) design informed by a cultural ecological-

transactional perspective, this study engaged youth in five different focus groups that differed by risk and functioning as determined by the community collaborators. First, collaborators and researchers asked what family, school, and neighborhood stressors, including community violence exposure and poverty-related stressors, were experienced by Mexican American youth residing in the community area of Little Village, Chicago (ecological risk contexts). Second, this study explored how youth respond to, interact with, and cope with these contexts in order to enhance understanding of possible adaptive responses among Mexican American youth (transactional responses that may be informed by culture and context). Third, the study sought to ascertain if stressors, coping, and psychosocial adjustment differed by a group's level of risk and functioning. To further understand youth experiences growing up in this neighborhood, a team of leaders from Enlace Chicago, a well-established community organization serving a predominantly Mexican American locality of Chicago, collaborated with researchers to gain in-depth understanding of youths' daily experiences in their community using qualitative methods.

Method

Participants

In keeping with the CBPR collaborative methodology (see Viswanathan et al. 2004), mentors and community outreach workers from Enlace, together with academic researchers, recruited youth involved in Enlace programming to partake in a project involving a series of focus groups and the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to ascertain youth perceptions of their neighborhood. The GIS data and focus group information regarding acculturative stress are being addressed in a separate paper. A total of 32 youth (50% male) aged 12–18 years ($M = 16$) from Enlace participated in the focus groups. In terms of family composition, 56% of youth in the study lived with both parents, 33% lived with either mother or father, and 11% resided with other family members, such as a grandparent. Youth reported a mean of 4.33 persons per household. In terms of parental education, most youth parents did not complete high school (61% of mothers, 77% of fathers). The majority of participants' fathers worked full time (72%), while participants' mothers were mostly identified as homemakers (67%). 22% of the youth were first-generation immigrants from Mexico while the remaining were U.S.-born. All youth in the study resided in the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago, IL, and attended public schools in the area. Little Village has one of the highest populations of Latinx individuals of any neighborhood in Chicago, with 75 percent of the area's Latinx population of Mexican-origin (Ready and Brown-

Gort 2005). Little Village is also comprised primarily of low-income and working-class families, with 31% of people living below the poverty line between 2008 and 2012 (City of Chicago Census Data 2008–2012). Despite its rich cultural backdrop, Little Village is plagued by high crime and gang violence (Spergel et al. 2003).

Consistent with CBPR approaches, the 32 Mexican American youth were divided into five separate focus groups, which were based on youths' preexisting involvement with Enlace services and thus the groups were determined by Enlace staff. Groups were formed based on youth participation in academic mentoring and college preparation (two separate groups out of the five), community mentoring (another two groups out of the five), and a work experience program. These groups were assigned by Enlace staff in order to promote group cohesion and amplify candidness within discussion. Based on this material, working knowledge of youth social functioning and family environment by Enlace staff, academic transcript information, and supplementary demographic information, the groups were further categorized by the research team and Enlace staff into three differing levels of functioning and risk (lower-risk, mixed-risk, and high-risk). "Lower-risk" youth included the two focus groups comprised of youth in academic mentoring programs (one group with lower-risk home and peer environments; one group who, in addition to hailing from lower-risk environments, were also in college preparation programming). Youth involved in a work experience program formed the "mixed-risk" group, composed of a larger group of mixed ages and moderate risk level. "High-risk" youth included the two focus groups conducted with youth involved in community mentoring (one group with known gang members; one group with the youngest youth).

Procedure

The current study utilized a CBPR design, which is a health research methodology designed to augment the worth of research simultaneously for both researchers and the communities in which they study (Viswanathan et al. 2004). This type of research involves collaboration between researchers, community members, and organization representatives and bidirectional exchange of expertise by all involved parties. Shared decision-making power is also a vital aspect of this type of approach to research as well as mutual ownership of both the research design and results. Using CBPR with youth is ideal because they are active participants in their development; they are "experts in their own lives" (Langhout and Thomas 2010). In addition, collaborating with staff from organizations within the community helps to ensure the data gathered will be accessible to the community and directly inform programming.

In order to cover all topics of interest, the five groups participated in three to four focus group sessions. A trained research team member, along with an Enlace staff member, led each focus group with another research team member to observe and take notes. All focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed by members of the research team. Written informed consent was obtained from parents along with written assent from the youth. The participants received \$40 as compensation for their participation. The Institutional Review Board of the university approved all aspects of this study.

Measures

Research staff partnered with agency staff in creating semi-structured focus group scripts. The scripts were informed by the cultural ecological-transactional perspective (examining an ecological framework with emphasis on the influence of cultural factors) and focused on generating information and discussion surrounding youths' perceptions of: (1) community attributes (2) psychosocial functioning/mental health and resilience, (3) school/community connection, and (4) familial and cultural experiences. The research team collaborated with community partners in order to ensure the appropriateness and cultural sensitivity of the scripts. Example prompts included: "How would you describe your neighborhood to someone who has never been there?", "How do people you know deal with stress?", and "How important is it for families in Little Village to maintain ties to their Mexican culture?"

Data Analyses

Using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), preliminary coding of transcripts was conducted based on the primary domains of focus informed by cultural ecological-transactional perspective. Following grounded theory methods outlined by LaRossa (2005), the research team employed thematic analysis with axial, open, and selective coding procedures. This framework included coding key environmental and systemic stressors as well as cultural factors influencing response to such stressors (e.g., cultural ecological-transactional perspective), while also allowing for refinement and open coding. The research team, along with a senior member of Enlace staff, evaluated the preliminary coding in order to define the breadth of each domain and either broaden, condense, or remove codes to establish a final code list with operational definitions of all codes founded on consensus. The coding was then completed by 4 team members using a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti 7.1. To ensure inter-coder reliability, a senior research team member was also trained and designated as the expert coder, double coding 20% of all focus

group transcripts to confirm reliability of 0.80 or above consistent with guidelines for establishing reliability (MacPhail et al. 2016). Content analyses were employed to identify themes from the coded transcripts. This paper focuses on stress, coping, and psychosocial functioning presented by the youth from the focus groups.

Results

Consistent with the cultural ecological-transactional perspective, participants described several ecological contexts contributing to stress, as well as resources from different ecological levels that interact with these stressors. The youth discussed concerns surrounding their communities, including violence, gang activity, and poverty. They described three primary coping strategies: active coping, avoidant coping, and aggressive coping. See Table 1 for illustrative quotations within each code and theme.

Stress

To address the study's first question, participants described general stressors they experienced in their community. In response to the study's second inquiry, results revealed that across all groups, stressors related to (a) violence and safety, (b) gangs and gang-related issues, and (c) poverty.

Violence

Regardless of risk level or functioning, community violence exposure was pervasive across all groups. Each group had participants that shared personal experiences regarding the death of a family member and/or friend due to community violence, mostly by gunfire, "One of my friends actually passed away, they shot him dead in the head and I was 9 years old and I ran." With these chronic concerns of violence, all participants except the older mixed group explained that they avoid (or are forced to avoid) dangerous parts of the community, and youth described most of their community as dangerous, at least some of the time. Except for the older high-risk group, all other groups identified their homes as safe locations yet also ones where they felt trapped. The majority of Little Village youth expressed shame and embarrassment about their neighborhood due to all the violence and gangs. In addition, youth noted that even positive neighborhood activities were often interrupted and ended by violence.

Gangs and the police

Once again, all focus group participants expressed exposure to gangs, whether directly or indirectly. For example, one of

Table 1 Focus group codes, themes, and selected quotes

Codes	Themes	Quotes
Problems in the community	Violence	“Today I got jumped. I started looking around my back. And you’ve gotta watch yourself... That’s all I can tell you. Bullets ain’t got no names on them. They hit whoever they hit.” [<i>High-risk group</i>] “For example, on Sunday, our friend died. And a lot of the people in our community got really mad, so that same day like, everyone just jumped into their car and went to the other side. And tried to get revenge back for killing him.” [<i>Low-risk group</i>]
	Gangs/Gang-related activity	“Maybe towards the borderlines, where there’s different gangs, there’s more fights, and more drive-bys, than other areas, because a lot of times, people from other gangs don’t want to go into neighborhoods too deep inside, because then, it’s harder to get out when something, like happens.” [<i>Low-risk group</i>] “Even sometimes they get into gangs and like they don’t have no place to go and no programs so they join a gang and just think that is family and that’s what pretty much takes them in... And it is crazy because if you would have a lot of programs in Little Village half of these kids would not be on the street and doing what they do.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
	Poverty	“My parents get stressed when they’re not able to afford some things or when they’re not able to pay for something. Or a problem that they have in their jobs. They find a way. They take it out by walking. Sometimes they take it out on me...Or they keep it in.” [<i>Mixed-risk group</i>] “It’s like, a lot of people that come to Little Village, they don’t got papers so they can’t work and like get the benefits that we do, the people that have papers. And they don’t got that benefit. Because I know a lot of Latinos that are my friends and they are hard workers.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
First-person coping strategies	Active	“I talk to my uncles, I talk to my aunts, my favorite ones, I guess, because I always told them everything since I was little, and I also talk to my girlfriend when I’m sad about something, I don’t know, to cheer me up.” [<i>Low-risk group</i>] “I know there will be psychiatrists and counselors that are there... they’re studying that so they would know how to deal with those type of things. So I think I would look for help with people who actually know what they’re talking about, they’re open-minded.” [<i>Low-risk group</i>]
	Avoidant	“I have my own problems to deal with, so why are you telling me yours? So I don’t usually tell them, I just keep them to myself.” [<i>Low-risk group</i>] “Like Modern Warfare II and Modern Warfare III. I just like to play them games just to put all that stress off my mind. It helps, actually, it relaxes me.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
	Aggressive	“You push me up to the limit you are going to get cursed out within seconds.” [<i>High-risk group</i>] “Straight up I find it in my nature if someone were to just to walk up to me, talk crap, and walk away, no. You best believe you are not going to walk away from me. You are going to end up fighting me and I am going to hurt you.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
Psychosocial functioning	Depressive symptoms/Distress	“My friends and my family, I think about them a lot and every time I do it hits me in the head. And sometimes I think I have no purpose in this earth and it is crazy. I am not supposed to be thinking about that. I am supposed to be thinking about the future but I have my mind set on death and everything else.” [<i>High-risk group</i>] “Like our parents. They think they understand us... But they don’t understand and they don’t see what we see and they have got to realize that man, we hurting inside sometimes. We hurting and hurting. And we are tired of it sometimes and just want to break.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
	Anxiety symptoms/Fear	“Mostly what I think about is are my friends in danger? Anyone that I know, I’m scared that they will be shooting or stabbing or something. I worry about the people around me, and the people that were around me” [<i>Low-risk group</i>] “All you gotta know is I watch my back every single moment of my life.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]
	Violent anger	“Sometimes I feel like I want to get into a fight but it’s just not the way to go. My mom says to not get in a fight unless they start with you first and then you kick their butt, then if I get in trouble for it I won’t get in trouble because I’m not the one who started it, and she says if I’m gonna get in trouble I should get in trouble for a reason and make it hurt.” [<i>High-risk group</i>] “You know, I was a kid, talking crap to her [my aunt] and I didn’t like it. I did some stupid stuff and I threw stuff at her, threw a bottle at her actually just for hitting me.” [<i>High-risk group</i>]

the high-risk youth explained how being in a gang demonstrated strength/power and offered a sense of family:

Straight up, look it, me, I used to be in a gang and the only thing I thought I had were my boys, but literally it didn't bring me a good future in the long run. It got me jumped ... it got me shot at and all and it's like why do I need to be in that just to show people that I am down that I got balls and all of that.

Even one of the younger at-risk youth observed the following:

If the gangsters like see someone who looks like a gangster and they don't know you then you'll get in trouble... yeah they'll tell you what are you doing in their area cause they got their own area if you pass that area you get in fights.

Due to this type of impulsive gang behavior, a different participant stated:

When I walk out of school ... there's always a bunch of gangbangers that are out there, when I walk by, they say 'Hi.' I say 'HI' back. I don't want them to think that I'm disrespectful, that I look down on them because they're gangbangers, because I think a lot of these gangbangers have different reasons why they join. So, I just try to be nice so they won't bother me, so I won't get in trouble or get picked on or stuff like that.

Thus, some youth reported engaging in normal interactions with gang members as a measure of respect and protection. Furthermore, it was indicated by all youth except those in the larger mixed group that they face consistent discrimination by police, for example, being questioned if they are gang-affiliated. When talking about her boyfriend, one participant said:

He was waiting for me in the corner because I was coming out of school and the cops stopped him. He was asking 'Why?' you know because it's his rights or whatever. They were just messing with him. He didn't do anything; he was just standing there.

Poverty

Youth underscored economic hardship as a significant stressor for the Little Village community and their families. The lack of resources was first noted by all the groups,

except the high-risk group, as demonstrated by the neighborhood's deteriorated physical characteristics: a lack of cleanliness and lack of order in the community. In addition, all groups mentioned the persistent difficulty of finding jobs, the financial difficulties of minimum wage work, and lack of benefits for the few jobs that were obtained, both for their parents and for themselves, especially due to the issue of immigrant status. The following statement was made about parents:

And since they're immigrants, they work too much. More than they're supposed to, and then they get minimum [wage], some of them don't even get minimum, they don't get vacation, they don't get a lot of benefits that documented people [do]. And since they're illegal here, then they can't stand up for themselves. They always have that constant fear.

Poverty was also an obstacle for youth to fully pursue their education. One student had difficulty engaging in high school due to working to supplement the family income: "The reason I haven't been involving until now in the community most of my high school years is because I worked. My mom can't be buying me things, so I pay for my own school or my own uniform." Another participant highlighted how many youths perceive college as inaccessible financially, which then seems to influence their future goals:

I think people drop out because they think they won't be able to make it to college, and they don't have the finances they need. They won't be able to pay for college and they think that they probably won't go to college. They think people will be racist to them. Maybe they get peer pressured by others to drop. They see that other people that are grown have no education, they just work at factories. They think that is the life they want to pursue. They want to have that life, and they don't have good role models around here.

Adjustment

To address the second question of this study, coping strategies and mood symptoms were discussed across focus groups. Three primary coping strategies were identified by the youth with differential use across groups: (a) active coping, (b) avoidant coping, and (c) aggressive coping. In addition, in response to the final inquiry of the study, mood symptoms and emotional responses were found to vary across groups.

Lower-risk groups

In response to stress, the lower-risk youth tended to report using both active and avoidant coping strategies. These two groups were the only ones to mention trying to reframe their thinking and stay positive. These groups also endorsed more support-seeking behaviors across family, friends, significant others, and counselors/mentors, particularly identifying people with resources, e.g., “When I find myself stressed, I try to find help in someone else. But somebody, who I know would be able to help me. Like an adult or somebody who has the resources.” They also noted the importance of support-seeking through family, e.g., “I consider family, the people who really care about you and when you really need them. They are people when you are down, they cheer you up.” In terms of avoidant coping, these youth often engaged in “positive” avoidant techniques such as trying to not focus on the stressor but rather focus on schoolwork and the future instead, e.g., “I think about the good things that have happened instead of the bad things. And, just not worry about that. I try to do and finish what I have to do.” In addition, these youth, like the other groups, identified emotional suppression and “keeping it in” as a way of coping.

While all groups reported symptoms of depression or distress, such as sadness and crying, these appeared to be more salient in the two lower-risk, higher functioning groups. Likewise, they also provided more reports of fear and anxiety symptoms. For example, safety issues were a common concern reported, such as

Mostly what I think about is, ‘Are my friends in danger?’ Anyone that I know, I’m scared that they will be [in a] shooting or stabbing or something. I worry about the people around me, and the people that were around me.

Additionally, these youth often reported internalizing symptoms regarding academics:

It’s that constant worrying about how am I going to pay for college. I don’t receive financial aid. It’s just another level of stress, it’s different how we do things. We deal with it. I guess, with any other person, we try to make the best of what we have.

Though these youth appeared to use ostensibly more adaptive coping strategies and reported fewer behavioral difficulties, they reported more internalizing symptoms.

High-risk groups

The high-risk youth primarily discussed avoidant and aggressive strategies as ways to deal with stress. The

younger children reported more impulsive aggression (e.g., punching, breaking, throwing objects), e.g., when the facilitator asked, “Who here takes, when you’re feeling angry or stressed or mad about something, you just keep it all inside and bottle it up?” and a participant responded, “So you grab something and throw it.” The older participants used aggressive coping as a more established component of behavioral repertoire (e.g., focus on harming individuals and weapons sometimes involved), e.g., when the facilitator asked if the youth were afraid of guns, one participant stated, “Nope. I’ve held a gun, I’ve shot a gun, and I’ve played with a gun. I’ve seen guns. I ain’t scared of no gun” and another stated, “You actually need a gun to protect yourself. Cause 5-0 ain’t going to always protect you.” While these groups also mentioned talking with friends and someone like a counselor or mentor if they had a problem, being able to solve one’s problems and having to be vigilant and watchful, especially for older youth, was endorsed. As for avoidant strategies, these youth mentioned ignoring or not caring about the stressor and the older ones identified emotional suppression and “keeping it in” similar to the other groups. Additionally, these high-risk youth were the only ones who endorsed substance use as a coping strategy to escape from their stress. For example, one participant shared, “Yeah, I smoke marijuana just to calm me down and just to get everything out of my mind. Just to relax.”

While all groups described anger as a normative reaction to stressors, these two high-risk groups primarily described feelings of anger and aggression. The anger was often described as reactive to an event/person and the aggression was both verbal and physical, as well as directed at both people and inanimate objects (e.g., wall, chair). The high-risk groups reported some depression; however, this was focused more on hopelessness or lack of future orientation than other symptoms. For example, when one member of the high-risk group was asked how people can cope with stress, he stated, “Straight up, from me to you, I don’t got hope. It’s died over the years, my hope... It is just buried so deep in my heart, nobody can find it, nobody is going to get to it.”

Mixed-risk group

This group of youth reported a lower range of coping as compared with other groups. They identified they could talk to anyone as one way to solve their problems. However, this group also recognized that they often needed to solve their own problems. In addition, they endorsed avoidant coping strategies such as suppressing/keeping in the stress or releasing it in distracting ways such as with exercise and playing video games. This mixed group also did not report many specific emotional responses to stressors. Instead these youth expressed a general feeling of distress from

being confined to addressing work demands and not being able to enjoy typical adolescent activities. One of the older youth explained, “...Almost all the time I work. So that’s why I didn’t get involved in the community or extra-curricular activities after school.”

Discussion

Several of the themes that emerged from the focus groups were consistent with previous research (Gillock and Reyes 1999) regarding urban low-income Mexican American youth. The results highlight the highly stressful environments in which youth from Little Village live and several elements of the daily stress can be understood as based in the macrosystem of politically driven immigration policy. Consistent with the cultural ecological-transactional perspective, larger federal policies (e.g., Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) indirectly affect the daily experience of many Mexican American youth through the restriction of benefits and opportunities as well as through contributing to a hostile and discriminatory environment (Torres et al. 2018). Urban Mexican American youth living in low-income neighborhoods experience not only developmentally appropriate stress (e.g., concerns about grades, peer pressure), but also stress related to political attitudes towards, and policies affecting their communities, which result in violence, gangs, poverty, and discrimination related to immigration. Thus, they have to learn to overcome the typical difficulties associated with a stressful developmental period, along with the unique stressors associated with their particular environments (Gillock and Reyes 1999). The finding that similar patterns of stress were identified across youth risk level suggests that stress is consistent and pervasive in the environment no matter their level of functioning.

Differing Risk Levels

It appears that what differentiates the higher to lower-risk youth is their distinct coping styles and their subsequent psychosocial functioning. The youth in this study self-identified as Mexican American, representing a disproportionately underserved group with regard to economic and educational resources (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). However, instead of considering them as a homogenous group, a transactional approach was used where systems influence individuals and individuals then influence systems in order to better understand intragroup heterogeneity by examining the differences across overall risk/functioning (Padilla 2004). While the majority of youth discussed using avoidant coping, the lower-risk, higher functioning group

coupled avoidant coping with active reframing and support seeking. Mexican American youth who engaged in active coping and cognitive restructuring strategies (i.e., “positive reinterpretation”) were more likely to have positive psychological and physical health (Vaughn and Roesch 2003). Further, minority youth who engaged in more active coping tended to experience significantly lower rates of depression and growth in response to stress (potentially a sense of success/mastery at overcoming adversity) than youth who engaged in more avoidant coping (Aldridge and Roesch 2008). Incorporating culturally relevant strategies, such as reframing, support seeking, and engaging familism may thus be useful when developing interventions for use in this population.

In contrast the high-risk groups tended to rely more exclusively on avoidant and aggressive coping. Although avoidance may be an adaptive response to chronic or violence-related stress in the short-term, research suggests it is linked to worsening externalizing symptoms over time (Wadsworth et al. 2011). Additionally, the use of avoidant coping may exacerbate PTSD symptoms among traumatized individuals with high levels of reactivity (Pineles et al. 2011). The relationship between posttraumatic stress and avoidant coping is particularly relevant for the sample given the high rates of trauma exposure. The use of aggressive coping strategies, which was endorsed by the high-risk groups, adds additional strain given that an angry or aggressive coping style is related to sustained depression symptoms, perceived stress, and increased drug use among youth (Galaif et al. 2003).

Internalizing and Externalizing Difficulties

Internalizing and externalizing symptoms were endorsed across risk groups highlighting the negative effect that stress is likely having on youth development. Compared to other minority youth, Mexican American youth have reported more internalizing symptoms (Mikolajczyk et al. 2007), often due to a variety of acculturation and immigration stressors (Polo and López 2008). Although internalizing symptoms, such as fear and distress, appeared across all groups, they tended to be reported more by the lower-risk, higher functioning groups. While these youth reported more internalizing symptoms, they appeared to use more adaptive coping strategies. It is possible that the recognition of internal states was more prevalent in these groups due to support for identifying feeling states, a sense of safety to recognize emotional states that can indicate vulnerability, and vocabulary to discuss these emotions. Perhaps this is due to developmental level, or perhaps internal awareness and mild forms of anxiety provide emotion- and behavior-regulation (curvilinear relationship between anxious arousal and performance/avoidance of danger). However, while

optimal levels of anxiety can enhance performance and discourage participation in risky behaviors, pathological levels of anxiety are robustly related to poor youth outcomes (Beesdo et al. 2009). The youth in the mixed-risk group expressed a general feeling of being “stressed.” It appeared that they had many responsibilities including earning money to pay for the basics, leaving little time for extracurricular activities which have been found to relieve stress and relate to positive psychosocial adjustment (Fredricks and Eccles 2010). Many of these youth are slightly older, either in high school or high school graduates, who are often working, going to school, and feeling responsible for the caretaking of their family.

In contrast to internalizing difficulties, externalizing symptoms displayed a different pattern by groups. More externalizing symptoms (aggression/violence and oppositional behavior) were reported by the high-risk groups. This is consistent with research suggesting disruptive behavior is associated with high-risk delinquent and criminal behavior (Babinski et al. 1999). The findings suggest the need to further understand whether high-risk youth are experiencing PTSD symptoms, which are resulting in reactive aggression/violence. The Little Village Youth Safety Map reported that about 45% of the adolescent youth felt that there was no way out of violent fights or that they did not know exactly how to avoid them (Bocanegra and Rak 2015). Although 69% of youth claimed to rely on their friends for information about avoiding violence, many students expressed that they would like access to more caring adults who can relate to their experiences and offer support. Research has shown that positive experiences with adults at school may increase later academic engagement and that Mexican American youth who perceive supportive relationships may be half as likely to drop out of school (Croninger and Lee 2001). Hudley et al. (2003) also found teacher support to be negatively associated with absences, detentions, and suspensions. Students are likely to benefit from these relationships when teachers are equipped to model positive behavior daily as well as demonstrate cultural expressions that affirm the identities of Mexican American youth (Green et al. 2008).

Active Coping and Other Protective Factors

The current study suggests that trusted adults may also promote active coping and many of the youth mentioned trying to find someone who could help when faced with problems. More peer group options as well as stronger adult support systems may be critical for violence prevention (Bocanegra and Rak 2015). An example of a program that provides both is the peer mentoring where high school students are trained and supervised to mentor youth two years younger (Richards et al. 2017). Due to the similarities

of age-related experiences, youth are able to develop bonds with their peers in ways that better increase their social skills and confidence than when paired with professional adults (Karabanow and Clement 2004). Thus, a peer-mentoring program may better allow youth to navigate realistic peer interactions in positive ways (Cameron and Karabanow 2003). Due to the present rapport among peers, Roberts et al. (2001) found peer relations to be the primary reason that many at-risk youth joined a community-based drug education program. This displays the usefulness of peer influence within educational programming and its impact on positive decision-making.

Moreover, since the cultural values enacted by one's family and community are likely to function as protective factors, the Mexican American cultural value of familism may help youth make positive decisions in adverse circumstances (Gonzalez et al. 2012). Talk of families emerged as a recurring theme. Familism is a cultural value that ensures loyalty and respect are given to one's parents and family. If included by caring adults or service providers into programming, this obligation to family could help youth resist engaging in risky behaviors (Kuperminc et al. 2009). This approach may also be useful for non-parental natural mentors such as neighbors, teachers, and coaches (Hirsch et al. 2002). Non-parental mentors of kin may help foster even greater resilience, as they may hold a unique understanding of youth's family and cultural context (Southwick et al. 2007). Volunteer mentors are different from natural mentors since their obligation is initiated outside of youth's natural setting. While they may vary in commitment and effectiveness, these relationships are likely effective in the context of local or national agencies, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, as they require a longer period of contact.

Results indicate that interventions that promote active coping strategies to supplement avoidance may also diminish externalizing problems. Researchers studying experiential therapeutic interventions have observed improved decision-making and problem solving skills in a sample of youth engaging in pro-social activities (Kallander and Levings 1996). This form of intervention uses activity engagement to improve emotional well-being. Included activities might involve wilderness trips, theater groups, or writing to facilitate positive encouragement and highlight youth potential. Ultimately, at-risk youth learn to apply positive lessons across various adverse contexts to reduce externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Karabanow and Clement 2004).

Several clinical implications can be derived from the results. First, given the high rates of violence exposure, it is essential for mental health clinicians to view low-income urban youths' internalizing and externalizing symptomatology through a trauma lens in order to accurately assess

and treat their distress. Often hidden, posttraumatic stress can cause behavioral difficulties as well as internal stress in the form of depression and anxiety (Deane et al. 2016). Second, the active coping and cognitive restructuring (i.e., reframing) that was practiced by the lower-risk group supports the finding that culturally competent evidence-based interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, should be a first line treatment when working with urban minority youth (Huey and Polo 2008). Finally, maximizing social supports by providing access to appropriate mentors and/or supportive peers should be a focus of the work with low-income urban youth.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to the understanding of stress, coping, and adjustment from Mexican American youth perspectives, there are several limitations that are important to note. The study sample was relatively small. Further, this study focused on the experiences of Mexican American youth in a particular community, so there may be limits to generalizability. The groups of youth were already established by the community partner, which presented a set of limitations. The study was unable to assess for gender differences as groups were mixed gender. Likewise, while the groups were generally comprised of different ages, the youngest youth were in a high-risk group and the oldest were in the mixed-risk group. Thus, age was a confounding variable. The data were also affected by the ongoing community violence and crime in an immediate sense. Described in more detail below, the youth brought their daily experiences into the focus group creating potential bias, (such as following an incident of community violence, the high-risk group might have brought more aggressive and angry responses into that particular group), as well as a salience to the understanding of their daily realities and relations. Finally, when coding transcripts and generating themes, while the research team prompted youth on questions about positive aspects of the community or within family/cultural values, the participants did not respond with as much content for these prompts and/or the same youth provided the few answers over and over again. In addition, the mixed-risk group had less content and quotes available resulting from briefer focus group sessions, which may explain why they are not identified with all other groups in certain themes.

Future research should continue to examine protective factors and benefits of coping styles identified by the lower-risk groups. Given the pervasive level of stress in urban low-income environments, typical protective factors (e.g., support-seeking) may not be as readily available in high-risk neighborhoods (Gillock and Reyes 1999). Future research could look at this further. Given the limited protective factors, youth may need a combination of protective factors to

maximize support. Gender differences also need further study. Past research suggests that urban Mexican American adolescent males and females differ in their experiences of stress, with males identifying more peer pressure for delinquent activities and females identifying more family and financial stress (Gillock and Reyes 1999). Similarly, another study found differential coping styles among males and females where females engaged in more culturally relevant family support seeking than males (Kobus and Reyes 2000).

Future studies should also consider mentoring efforts that are able to strengthen the family environment, similar to the Family Mentoring Program (FMP). The FMP intervention aimed not only to foster the development of youth participants, but also to improve parenting as well (Barron-McKeagney et al. 2001). Barron-McKeagney et al. (2001) suggest that participation in community life is protective for youth in at-risk communities, as it may decrease the likelihood of participating in delinquent behavior. Additionally, it promotes parental involvement which could further protective factors by potentially improving parenting. Effectiveness of programming involving recreational activities (i.e., sports & reading) as well as formal education on gangs, family interactions, cultural expression, and community engagement should be examined in conjunction with parent educational programming. Group programs that allow mentors, youth, and parents to build healthy relationships can help maintain a consistently positive environment for at-risk youth beyond the school setting. In addition to this programming, offering psychoeducation, job opportunities as well as therapeutic and career development resources are necessary for properly stabilizing Mexican American youth and families.

Future work would also benefit from the continued use of CBPR through a cultural ecological-transactional perspective to investigate neighborhood/community processes. This work suggests collaboration benefitted both this study and the community organization. Research and Enlace staff worked together on all aspects of the project from questions used, group formation, and leadership of focus group sessions to communication of findings to staff and the community leaders. The successful partnership with Enlace allowed for the learning of several important points regarding CBPR: (1) The need for open dialog between researchers and community stakeholders, (2) a clear understanding of the projects' goals and (3) the importance of flexibility. The study's researchers had to learn to balance sound research methods with realities of the low-income community. One salient example involved a member of the high-risk group getting into a physical altercation with a man outside of the community center (unrelated to the current study) for allegedly stealing a bicycle immediately prior to the focus group session. The intense anger, and desire for revenge disrupted the focus group, making the questions for that day temporarily irrelevant until

processing the aggression as well as the surrounding feelings and cognitions took place. Finally, CBPR should be utilized to improve the community under investigation by improving programming and relevant resources available.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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